

Message Text

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 QUITO 02015 241514Z

53

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C O N F I D E N T I A L QUITO 2015

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, EC

SUBJ: FIRST SIGNIFICANT PRESS ATTACKS ON PRESIDENT RODRIGUEZ

1. SUMMARY: SEVERAL VOLLEYS HAVE BEEN FIRED IN RECENT DAYS MARKING THE FIRST SIGNIFICANT PUBLIC CLASHES BETWEEN PRESS AND PRESIDENT RODRIGUEZ' GOVERNMENT, AND CONFIRMING EARLIER INDICATIONS THE EMBASSY HAS HAD THAT OUT-OF-POWER CIVILIAN POLITICAL ELEMENTS MY BE ABOUT TO GO AFTER THE GOVERNMENT IN EARNEST. END SUMMARY

2. FIRST OFF THE MARK WAS A COLUMN IN EL TIEMPO ON MARCH 18TH BY FORMER FOREIGN MINISTER AND HIGHLY RESPECTED PPLITICAL COMMENTATOR JULIO PRADO. PRADO ATTACKED THE GOE OVER THREE "CENSURABLE ACTS": (A) THE ORDER THAT SCHOOLS BE CLOSED AND PUBLIC SERVANTS DIRECTED TO THE STREETS WITH LITTLE FLAGS "TO PAY HOMAGE TO THE DICTATOR;" (B) THE "GROSSLY EXAGGERATED" EXPENDITURES FOR THE PRESIDENT'S TRIP; PRADO STATED "THE PEOPLE ARE ASTONISHED TO DISCOVER THAT FOR A FOUR OR FIVE DAY OPEC MEETING, THE MINISTRY OF FINANCE WAS ORDERED TO MAKE \$600,000 (US) AVAILABLE TO THE DELEGATION, EXCLUSIVE OF THE COST OF THE AIRCRAFT." (C) TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE PRESIDENT'S ABSENCE TO PROMOTE HIM TO MAJOR GENERAL SO IT WOULD NOT APPEAR THAT HE WAS PROMOTING HIMSELF.

3. A SECOND PROMINENT POLITICAL COMMENTATOR, BENJAMIN ORTIZ, PAST PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL UNION OF JOURNALISTS, CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 02 QUITO 02015 241514Z

IN A COLUMN IN EL TIEMPO ON MARCH 19TH, ATTACHED THE

GOVERNMENT ALONG MANY OF THE SAME LINES; "A DICTATORSHIP WHOSE ORIGINAL JUSTIFICATION WAS HARDLY NOVEL -- THE NEED FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE, CHAOS IN THE REPUBLIC, THE THREAT OF NATIONAL ANARCHY." "IT TOOK POWER ON A POPULIST BANDWAGON, BUT WILL IT END IN RIGHT-WING FASCISM OR LEFT-WING ADVENTURISM?" ORTIZ WAS ALSO MUCH EXERCISED BY THE SPECTRE OF ORDERING SCHOOL CHILDREN AND PUBLIC SERVANTS TO DISPLAY "SPONTANEOUS ENTHUSIASM" FOR THE RETURNING PRESIDENT.

4. MARCH 20TH'S EL COMERCIO CARRIED A DOUBLE-BARRELLED BLAST, A CARTOON BY ASDRUBAL PORTRAYING NERVOUS CHILDREN WAVING LITTLE FLAGS OF WELCOME UNDER A HOT SUN; AND AN EDITORIAL WHICH TOOK OFF AFTER THE SAME POINT. CLEARLY, THE MINISTRY OF PUBLIC EDUCATION'S ACT OF CLOSING THE SCHOOLS TO PROVIDE A CAST OF CHEERING THOUSANDS HAS PINCHED AN EXPOSED NERVE.

5. THE BIT ABOUT THE SCHOOL CHILDREN WILL NO DOUBT DIE A NATURAL DEATH, IN TIME. THE ATTACK ON THE PRESIDENT'S PROMOTION, HOWEVER, COULD HARDLY BE LET TO PASS. ALL MAJOR ECUADOREAN NEWSPAPERS (QUITO'S COMERCIO AND TIEMPO, GUAYAQUIL'S UNIVERSO AND TELEGRAFO) CARRIED HALF-PAGE ADS ON MARCH 19TH, SIGNED BY MINISTER OF DEFENSE (AND RETIRED MAJOR GENERAL) MARCO ALMEIDA (WHO WAS ACTING PRESIDENT DURING RODRIGUEZ. ABSENCE, AND SIGNED THE DECREE PROMOTING THE PRESIDENT), DEFENDING HIS ACTION AS ONE "REQUIRED BY JUSTICE, BY LOGIC, AND STRICTLY WITHIN THE LAW." ALMEIDA CHALLENGED THE CRITICS TO A DEBATE, AT A TIME AND UNDER CIRCUMSTANCES OF THEIR CHOOSING, ALMEIDA'S ACTIONS.

6. IN HIS MARCH 21ST COLUMN, JILIO PRADO TOOK UP THE CHALLENGE, SAYING HIS COMMENTARIES NEVER WERE BASED ON ATTACKS ON EPOPLE, ONLY ON PRINCIPLES. HIS PRINCIPLES WERE BASED ON A DEFENSE OF REPUBLICAN INSTITUTIONS AND POPULAR RIGHTS, AND HE RESERVED THE RIGHT TO CENSURE ANY ACTS WHICH DID NOT CONFORM TO JUSTICE. HE WNET ON TO DENOUNCE ALMEIDA'S ATTACKS AGAINST HIM, AND ACCEPT THE IDEA OF A PUBLIC DEBATE. PRADO SUGGESTED AS A THEME

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 QUITO 02015 241514Z

"THE RIGHT OF THE DICTATORSHIP TO PERPETUATE ITSELF IN POWER AGAINST THE RIGHTS OF ECUADOREAN CITIZENS TO FREELY CHOOSE THEIR LEGITIMATE GOVERNMENT." HE WNE ON, "THE DEBATE SHOULD BE IN FRONT OF TELEVISION CAMERAS SO PUBLIC OPINION CAN BE THE JUDGE. NO HOLDS BARRED; THE DEBATE SHOULD BE BETWEEN CIVILIZED PEOPLE BEFORE THE NATIONAL CONSCIENCE. NO THREATS. I AM AT THE DISPOSAL OF THE MINISTER ON A DAY AND AT A TIME OF HIS CHOOSING.

THE MINISTER HAS THE FLOOR."

7. THE CRITICISM OF THE TRIP ITSELF PROVOKED A SEPARATE HIGH LEVEL RESPONSE, WITH PRESIDENTIAL SPOKESMAN CARLOS AGUIRRE ACCUSING THE CRITICS OF "BAD INTENTIONS, AND BAD FAITH" IN CHALLENGING THE SUCCESS OF THE PRESIDENT'S TRIP TO OPEC, RUMANIA AND VENEZUELA, "A SUCCESS NOT ONLY FOR THE PRESIDENT, BUT FOR ALL OF ECUADOR." AGUIRRE WENT ON TO SAY "IF THESE COMMENTARIES AND PUBLICATIONS ARE SIMPLY TRYING TO SPREAD FALSEHOODS, THE GOVERNMENT WILL TAKE ACTION TO SEE THAT THEY NO LONGER DISTORT THE TRUTH AND SPREAD THEIR LIES."

8. COMMENT: THE PRADO COLUMN, THE OPEN DEBATE OVER THE MERITS OF THE PRESIDENT'S PROMOTION, HIS RECEPTION BACK IN QUITO, AND THE COST OF HIS TRIP, STAND AS THE FIRST RECENT MEANINGFUL PUBLIC SHOTS AT THE PRESIDENT. THE PRADO COLUMN IS ALSO THE FIRST PUBLIC HINT AT POSSIBLE CORRUPTION WITHIN THE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE (REFERENCES TO THE EXORBITANT COST OF THE OPEC TRIP), SOMETHING HITHERTO ABSENT IN PREVIOUS CRITICISM OF THE CURRENT GOE. WE TAKE THESE EXCHANGES TO BE CONFIRMATION THAT OUT-OF-POWER CIVILIAN POLITICAL ELEMENTS MAY BE READY TO TACKLE THE GOVERNMENT HEAD-ON -- AT LEAST THROUGH THE MEDIA.
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